

GALILEO IN QUEEN'S

H. G. CALDWELL

Honorary Archivist, Ulster Medical Society

THE University has lately taken into its care a piece of Florentine statuary. The statue of Galileo has been moved from the Ulster Museum to what, it is hoped, will be a permanent home in the Medical Biology Centre where it has been placed in a well-lit position at the north end of the front corridor. The statue was originally brought from Florence to Belfast by the late Professor Sir William Whitla and presented by him to the Ulster Medical Society in 1915.

Sir William is remembered as a generous benefactor of Queen's and of the medical profession in Ulster. He was an ardent traveller, visiting Russia, Palestine, Italy, France and Canada. During his travels he indulged his passion for collecting pictures and pieces of sculpture, among them the statue of Galileo which was too large to be placed in his house in Lennoxvale (now the residence of the President and Vice-Chancellor of Queen's) or in the Medical Institute in College Square North which he had presented to the Ulster Medical Society. The statue was then given a temporary home in the Belfast Public Library in Royal Avenue and was later taken to the new Museum and Art Gallery on Stranmillis Road.

The authorities of the museum, having given lodging to the statue for 65 years, desired to be relieved of it, and the Ulster Medical Society turned to the University for assistance, with the gratifying result that the Galileo has now been housed on the Queen's campus.

The sculptor was Pio Fedi, one of the most distinguished of the Florentine sculptors of the 19th century. Some of his work is still displayed in the main square of Florence amongst statues which are known the world over. The following account of it appeared in the *Transactions of the Ulster Medical Society* in 1915. The writer's name is not given.

"A colossal statue in Carrara marble. The celebrated astronomer is represented in the prison of the Inquisition sitting on a stool; a map of the world and rolls of paper lie on the ground. The right leg is extended, and the left is bent. The right hand rests on the knee, on which is unrolled an astronomical map. The other hand supports his chin in a thoughtful attitude. A long beard falls on his breast. The brows are knitted, and the face wrinkled. He is completely absorbed in the working out of some new problem, or perhaps he is thinking of his famous dilemma, "Eppur si muove" ('It moves for all that').

The work was intended for the monumental cemetery at Pisa. The author was so fond of his work that he did not wish anyone to touch it. He himself rough-hewed the block and carried it out to the end without adding anything thereto.

Pio Fedi loved his art and cultivated it with the passion of the ancients; he took the subjects of his works from classical sources thus drawing his inspiration from the actual font of eternal beauty.

To this artist has been granted in his lifetime one of the greatest of honours — one of his works, "L'Enlevement de Polyxene", has been purchased by public



subscription raised by the Florentines, and has been placed beneath the roof of the Orcagna where it represents modern art side by side with the immortal works of Benvenuto Cellini, Donatello and Jean Bologna in what the Florentines consider to be the most beautiful portico in the world and the monument capital of the history of art”.

His Dante group is in the Pitti, and other works of his are met with in various galleries and public squares in Italy.

That it is a faithful portrait of Galileo is vouched for by the fact that the sculptor copied the death mask of the great scientist which is still preserved in the Florentine Museum”.

Since Galileo was a physicist and astronomer his statue some might say would be more appropriately housed among physicists than anatomists and physiologists. However, it was as a medical student that he began his university training and he is again among medical students. In addition, the Whitla Medical Building which both commemorates the donor of the statue and (by courtesy of the university) provides accommodation for the Ulster Medical Society is virtually an integral part of the Medical Biology Centre. The new location of the Galileo is therefore entirely appropriate.

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